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**50<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION**  
Agenda item 5: programme questions (United Nations Statistics Division)  
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**Programme statement (Oral Report)**  
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Distinguished Colleagues, Delegates and Friends,

I am going to cheat a little bit. I am supposed to talk about the Division's Programme, but of course, the Division's Programme cannot be separated from the Commission. I also know that, if I talk about my Programme of the Division, you will start checking your phones and falling asleep, while looking politely interested, I will start with some reflections on the Statistical Commission hoping that will get your attention.

Statistical Commission reflections

I have to start with a personal note. We are all celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> session. It is a golden jubilee, but for me personally, it is a silver jubilee because this is my 25<sup>th</sup> session of the Statistical Commission. So, I plan to print T-shirts next week that say: "I have survived 25 sessions of the Statistical Commission". When I tell people that I have done 25 sessions of the Statistical Commission, I usually get that mixed look: on the one hand, they sort of say "wow, that is somewhat impressive"; on the other hand, they have on their face a little bit of "does it hurt?" My friends have a difficult time understanding me at this time of the year because I am usually completely exhausted after this week, but at the same time I am a very happy person, so they start envying me and say: "you obviously took the right job". I must confess that when I was a kid, I liked history, math, languages and people, and I think I can use all of that here so, yes, I am a very happy person.

50<sup>th</sup> session

I think – I hope – you have fun! We gave you the pins. We printed brochures. We also had two historical firsts.

For the first time, the Chair of the Statistical Commission went to meet the Secretary-General. And for the first time, we were part of the official United Nations Press Briefing. Who says we cannot reach out to high places?

We are also in the General Assembly Hall, and I have to smile because I saw many of you taking pictures and that made me very happy because it expresses our feeling that we have to be and we are part of a something much bigger than just our statistical programme. That is important that we are part of a bigger whole.

Picking up on those two historical firsts, when meeting the Secretary-General, our Chair was trying to convey that feeling that we are a very vibrant community, and we are indeed vibrant. Sometimes, the Chair has difficulties starting the session because people are interacting and chatting so much. The other indicator of vibrancy is that half of the session is sitting at the Vienna Café and having interesting conversations, which for me is a positive thing. We did not tell the Secretary-General that, but I think we did get across the feeling that we are a very vibrant and a special professional community. I must say I always get that expression when we convey this to higher-level people. They are on the one hand intrigued, and on the other hand they do very much respect what we are doing because we are truly special in that sense. The one word that came up with the Secretary-General a lot was “quality”. That was interesting for me to observe.

In the press conference, we did have a little bit of difficulty to convey what’s new. Journalists do not want to know what you are doing, they only want to know what is new. And that is a problem that we have sometimes: to convey what is really new. But our Chair did a very good job emphasizing one point, namely that we have something very important in common with the journalists: we put the world in a rearview mirror where the world can see itself and try to understand itself. And there is high premium telling the truth. So I was wondering who are we as Statistical Commission? Are we the Quality Management Commission? Are we the Truth Commission?

We had a special event on Tuesday at lunchtime. I was able to reach out to three of my predecessors, so we had 30 years of directorship of UNSD present, and I always joke and say the only job that the directors have, the only line in the job description is to defend the Statistical Commission fiercely, and that is what we have been doing. We have been doing this for over 70 years now; I know the people that have been doing this for 30 years, and I think we did well. At that event we reflected that the Statistical Commission has always followed the paradigms of development. In the 1950s, everybody was talking about economic development, so we developed the SNA. In the 1970s, there was a lot of talk about social dimensions, and then gender statistics and other social measures were developed. In the 90s, the focus enlarged to environmental development issues, and we answered with our environmental measures. And perhaps nowadays we focus on institutional and governance aspects of the sustainable development agenda.

So, in that sense, I think we can proudly say that we have always supported the agenda. Of course we have another proud piece – our anchor piece, our core piece – the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. It was also the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fundamental Principles. With the 50<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission, this almost went a little bit under, but I was very happy that we had a discussion on the Fundamental Principles.

But to be really honest, talking to my predecessors, - those who were there perhaps share that impression - that there was a mixed feeling. On the one hand, looking back, we are proud. I think the Statistical Commission has done well. But there was also a pervasive feeling of nervousness about the future. I think there is a sense, a mixed sense, perhaps shared by many of you, of nervousness, of opportunity in this moment. So, who are we?

In my personal reflection, we are talking all about the right topics. We are talking about classic quantitative statistics, big data, geospatial data, the continued relevance of the Fundamental Principles, quality, open data, statistical organization and management, integration, interlinkages. We are talking about the right topics. So, is the problem perhaps the “we”? Are we the right people? Do we bring the right people into this room? Do we perhaps need a more diverse group? Do we need more diverse voices at the table? We are trying to do that mostly through the side events, which many people appreciate a lot. Delegates tell me: your side events are a lot more interesting than your actual sessions. Look into your heart whether you share that opinion or not. So, what can we do perhaps about the official sessions? Can we bring some extra voices here? It could be done in two ways. It could be done at the global level so that we - like in the side events - invite people. It could also be done at your level. You could bring people in your delegations that represent perhaps the wider statistical system or the wider information system actually as we enlarge at the national level. So, I am just putting this out as a reflection. I am certainly not alone to give an answer to that question, but I also would like to observe that we have added a sort of a brother or a sister to the Statistical Commission through the World Data Forum. With the Forum we have created a space where a lot of our partners are invited to come and discuss with us and reflect with us. We have done that, because we realized we could not invite them into the Statistical Commission. Look around here, the room is already pretty full and it is wonderful that it is full, and I think it is exactly the right people that we need to take care of the core business of the Statistical Commission, which is still parliamentary: the adoption of norms and standards. But perhaps we can enlarge this and go into the direction of data stewardship, which is what you are also doing at the national level, and I invite the Bureau to engage into a reflection. We have already started reflecting on the working methods in many groups under the Commission, but in a way that is a bit almost a mechanical exercise. I hope you will agree that we enlarge this reflection to discuss with the Bureau on what we can do to make the Statistical Commission a little bit more interesting and vibrant and more a mix of the type of discussions that we had at the World Data Forum, in the side events and in the official meetings. I am of course looking forward to all of your inputs. This is not something that a few people can solve alone.

So, these are my initial reflections on the Statistical Commission; that was the fun part for you. Now you have to listen to me talking about the Statistics Division and you have to play your role as my Executive Board!

So, there are still some Statistical Commission indicators that I owe you. We have 135 countries in the room this year, 50 agencies and 14 Non-Governmental Organizations. The number of side events was 86. This has been pretty stable over the last couple of years. So, in a way we have perhaps reached a plateau, which could be yet another indicator for starting a reflection process.

At this point, I would like to thank Paris21, the World Bank and the DFID projects for providing funding for some of the people to be here with us; probably many bilateral and other donors and partners have provided funding for individual delegations that we are not

even aware of. So thank you very much, because bringing everybody here is critically important so that we can have this broad forum.

Let me now talk about my programme, our programme, the UNSD Programme for 2019. What are the high priorities?

Of course, the **IAEG-SDG support**: we will have to navigate the first review of the indicator framework; that would keep us busy.

We are of course preparing the global report and this year the global report is particularly important because it is the first review year of the 2030 Agenda for the High-Level Political Forum and the Summit in September. So look forward: when your heads of States are coming to New York, they should be reading our report in order to understand where we are in the journey of the Sustainable Development Goals. This year, we do not have a big event. Let me share and be open with you: I am glad that we do not have a two-thousand-people event to organize because we had two last year with the second UN World Data Forum and the first World Congress Forum on Geospatial Information. It was a lot of fun, but it was also very energy consuming - not only at an individual level but also at a group level - as you can surely imagine.

The High-level Group will certainly be able to concentrate on the very important topic of financing, which is very critical as we go forward because we really have to take on that gap from defining indicators and have methodological discussions on the one hand and actually collecting the data and implementing them. For that we will need a solid funding base.

**National systems to be built.** We have the Federated Information System, National Development Data Platforms and Dashboards; and we have the Handbook on Management and Organization. These are very important building blocks.

We heard the call for **better coordination**, so we will of course also focus on perhaps stronger and improved support to our UN System colleagues and the CCSA.

As you know, we are also working on **Geospatial Information Management**. It has been very enriching to bring those two information systems together. Those who were here earlier this morning could see in the side events that we are developing the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework, which is very exciting because it should ultimately lead to national action plans. But as geospatial information is developed at the national level, the statisticians need to be part of that debate because that is how we can integrate these information systems right from the beginning.

**Big data:** We have the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Big Data for Official Statistics coming up in Rwanda, and we have the global platform as a concrete deliverable.

**Quality** is also one of our core commitments. Now that we have the National Quality Assurance Frameworks Manual for Official Statistics, we need to look into the implementation.

Of course, we still work on our core **fundamentals**. We do that in particular on a long-term perspective, because some of the things that I have just mentioned are very highly visible and urgent but in the long run it is more issues like “what do we do with the SNA?” that matter.

There is a **census** coming up next year. This is our regular bread and butter. Of course those things make perhaps not always a lot of noise, but they are fundamentally what we are all about. We need to implement our regular **social statistics programme**, including gender statistics, time-use and migration, being very politically relevant.

We are working on the revised **SEEA** and related systems, which is a big opportunity to integrate various information systems, which is exactly at the core of the SDGs. Of course we will continue our work on **climate change indicators** and also **disaster statistics** as we discussed this week.

This would not be possible - I will be frank with you - with our regular budget.

We actually are quite lucky that we are able to attract a lot of extra budgetary funding and I would really like to take this opportunity to thank our donors that helped us throughout the year with quite significant contributions.

We have the European Union with the Project on Natural Capital Accounting. We have Eurostat grants supporting our work on the SEEA-Experimental Ecosystem Accounting Revision Handbook and our work on the Handbook on Organization and Management. The World Bank supported us in two important areas: Gender statistics and census. These projects ended just this past year. Australia supported us in disability statistics, however this project was discontinued. But we also have grants from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on SEEA. China has a big trust fund with us not only in the area of developing statistics, but also in the area of geospatial information management. From Germany, we receive support to enhance natural capital accounting policy uptake and relevance. From Japan, we have a grant of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication to support the SDG indicators work and gender statistics. We just had our Global Gender Forum in Tokyo. From Switzerland, we have a grant to help with the participation of panelists in the upcoming third UN World Data Forum. From the UK, we have a big project by the Department for International Development (DFID) on SDG monitoring and creating national development data platforms, also supporting our SEEA work. And we have fellowships by Japan, the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat) and China.

So, I hope I did not forget an important donor; we very carefully checked. If you did not hear your name, your country or your organization, please do not be shy, give me a call and I am happy to include you in the list of our donors next year.

We also have internally a big UN development account, which is an internal funding mechanism, which helps us to work very closely with the regional commissions and the UN Secretariat units on many areas related to the SDGs.

And, of course, I do not want to forget many of you who provided in kind expertise, not only for the many working groups that we have but also for the workshops when you send a resource person. While no money changes hands we are also very happy to take in kind contributions. So if you can help us with a workshop or with a handbook, through writing a chapter for example, we are always happy to accept your support.

As you can see, the funding is mostly a mix for our methodological work, but the big chunk is concentrated in capacity building, which is a good thing.

So over the course of a year, we have almost one event every week, and we are able to train several thousand participants of meetings around the world, either participants in workshops or fellows. I believe that this is really what builds the very strong relationships between your offices and our office: when people meet at working level at a workshop. You can hear me at the executive level, which is very important but I believe that a very strong connection needs to be built at the working level. This is happening and I am very happy about that.

I have to say a few things about management.

We are just in the process to submit the 2020 budget, which is special as the UN is switching from biannual budgets to annual budgets, so that is just doubling our workload - oh no, I did not just say that - it is of course much more efficient. We are in the process of submitting a detailed work programme, but we were not quite ready for this session. I therefore suggest with your permission that once we are ready with our 2020 programme proposals we will share it with the Bureau for their review and substantive feedback.

We had to do a 1% cut, which is a cut, but it is of course to a certain extent manageable with the sufficiency gains that we also clearly had through the internal reorganization, which is working out very well for us. The problem is not the efficiency gains or the 1% cut, the problem is the additional requests on programme elements that continue to be brought to us. Just to give you a few examples: Of course, the whole body of indicator work is important and increasing the need for capacity development. Migration is a new topic that we just discussed, where the world now looks at our office to make a contribution. Unfortunately these new elements do rarely come with the resources necessary.

So, as you can see we are relying increasingly on extra-budgetary funding and this sometimes also covers our core programme. This is clearly not an ideal situation from a managerial point of view and it exposes us to some vulnerabilities. One example is disability statistics: we had presented our programme on disability statistics and we had the Australian funding for the past year. But then this funding could unfortunately not be extended, so I will have to prepare a report to the Commission next year how this has affected our disability programme. We will either have to scale down the programme or look for alternative sources of funding. As you can see, I am shameless I am using every opportunity and every audience to fight for my cause here.

In closing, I want to say that I have been very, very happy about how many times UNSD was mentioned in the last couple of days. You seem to be happy with the work that we are doing. For many of the programme items, there is one particular person that I have in mind or often a very small team. When you mention that, you often know who they are because you know the teams behind. And as I said often those teams are far too small.

For us, the preparation for the 51<sup>st</sup> session starts on Monday. As you know this is not just a week or two. The work of the many subgroups around the world is supported by my staff and literally some of the work that we have discussed this week will start next week. I am very grateful to my team, the staff of the UN Statistics Division, for their substantive contributions, but also for the many helping hands that I had in the last couple of days to make you feel welcome and comfortable here.

I started to tell you that I am a very happy person where I am right now, and that is thanks to you, my international peers and colleagues, and thanks to the privilege that I have of leading a fantastic team.

Thank you very much!